The Other America: Homeless Families in the Shadow of the New Economy

Family Homelessness in Kentucky, Tennessee and the Carolinas

Over the past decade, the American economy has turned from the hard times of recession to a period of prolonged prosperity. Newspapers report surging stock markets, low unemployment, reduced welfare rolls and increased opportunities. Nonetheless, in the shadow of this success, the problem of family homelessness grows.[1]

In early 2000, the Institute for Children and Poverty partnered with Volunteers of America to survey 202 homeless families, with 370 children, living in fourteen shelters in Kentucky, Tennessee and the Carolinas. Surprisingly, homeless families in these regions appear to be better off then their counterparts nationwide: fewer are on public assistance, many more adults finished high school and almost twice as many are employed.[2] Yet education and employment no longer preclude homelessness. Families in these regions find themselves notched down the poverty ladder from the ranks of the working poor into homelessness.

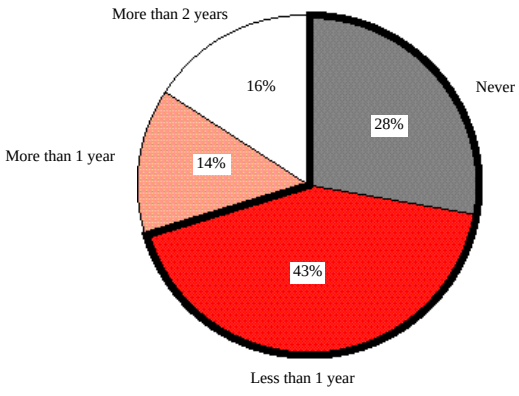
Who Are They?

The typical homeless family in this study consisted of a thirty-two year-old single woman with two young children (see Table 1). She is slightly more likely to be African-American than white, has a high school education, and has close to a fifty/fifty chance of being employed. She and her family have been homeless for an average of eleven months and are most likely experiencing homelessness for the first time. Parents in this region are not long-term welfare recipients: twenty-eight percent (28%) have never been on welfare and another forty-three percent (43%) were on public assistance for less than one year (see Figure 1).

Table 1: Homeless Family Profile

PARENTS	N=202		
Gender		**Employment**	
Female	94%	Currently Employed	42%
Race		Average Time Employed	6 mos.
African-American	50%	**Average Time Homeless**	11 mos.
White	44%	**Homeless More than Once**	42%
Average Age	32 yrs.		
< 25 Years	19%	**CHILDREN**	N=370
Marital Status		**Average Age**	7 yrs.
Single	84%	< 5 Years	36%
Average # of Children	2	**Education** (Children Age 5-17)	
		Attended Preschool	82%
Education Level		Enrolled in School	94%
≥ High School	77%	Repeated a Grade	15%

Figure 1: Homeless Parents: Time on Welfare



The families surveyed are not chronic welfare recipients. In fact, seventy-one percent (71%) have either never been on welfare or have been on welfare for less than one year.

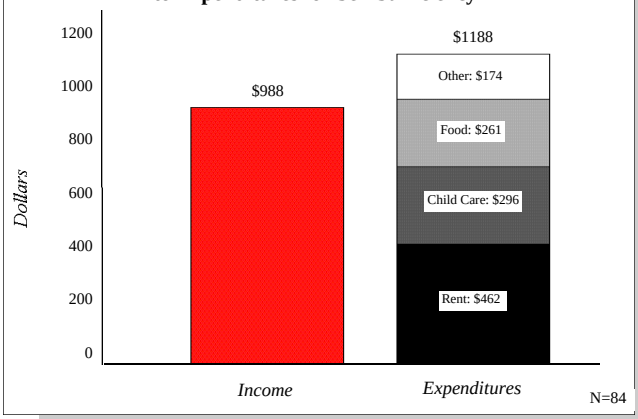
As for the children living in these shelters, eighty-two percent (82%) attended pre-school, almost all are enrolled in school and only fifteen percent (15%) repeated a grade—all positive contrasts to national trends.[3] In many ways these families resemble typical working families—why then are they homeless?

Dollars and Sense

Over the last two decades, the United States has witnessed a significant decrease in the number of jobs in the manufacturing sector and a concurrent rise in service-sector employment.[4] Jobs with traditionally higher wages have been replaced by those with low wages and few, if any, benefits. At the same time, the percentage of working poor families is steadily on the rise.[5] In Kentucky, Tennessee and the Carolinas, lower pay coupled with the increasing cost of living has forced some families who were once considered working poor into a new class of *working homeless*.

The reason that working poor families become homeless is often a simple matter of finances. The median income for working homeless families in this region is $247 per week or $988 per month. However, the cost of basic family needs —child care, food, and housing—exceeds that income (see Figure 2). It is only a matter of time before they find themselves homeless.

Figure 2: Working Homeless Family's Monthly Income Compared to Expenditures for Self Sufficiency [6]



These costs are based on a three person family (single mother with two children) assuming one child is attending a child care center. Transportation and utilities are included in "other." These expenditures are most likely underestimated in that they exclude medical costs, clothing, etc. Homeless families in this study would need to earn at least another $200 a month to afford to live on their own.

In fact, a typical working homeless family in this study would need to earn 120 percent (120%) of their current income to afford just their basic needs. Of the thirty-seven percent (37%) of those who lived independently before coming to a shelter, one-fifth (20%) became homeless because they could not pay their rent. Nineteen percent (19%) who were not employed cited a lack of affordable/suitable child care as the primary reason that they were not working. Clearly, their expenses outweigh their means.

Not having enough money for the basics—food, transportation, housing—is very nerve racking. My child has poor health and requires extra visits to the doctor and pharmacy; neither are close by. My job at a University Pizza Hut is not a steady one. I get laid off when the school is closed and do not get paid.
- 25 year-old Homeless Parent

Holes in the Safety Net?

Homeless families in Kentucky, Tennessee and the Carolinas often find themselves struggling with unrealistic budget constraints without appropriate assistance. For example, families can seek housing assistance through federally sponsored programs, such as Section 8 rental subsidies. Yet obtaining this support has become increasingly difficult. While forty-six percent (46%) of those surveyed are currently on a waiting list for Section 8 vouchers, most will wait years before receiving help.[7]

Similarly, the demand for child care assistance is growing and will continue to grow as more families leave the welfare rolls.[8] Even though states consistently use all federal funds available for child care subsidies, and invest large sums themselves, there continues to be a severe unmet need.[9] In these four states, only a quarter of working families eligible for child care assistance under state regulations (24%) actually receive it.[10]

Moreover, many of the families surveyed do not receive even the traditional forms of government assistance: over half (54%) do not currently receive welfare. Additionally, about one-third (34%) do not collect food stamps—even though eighty-seven percent (87%) are eligible.[11] Without assistance these families are simply unable to make ends meet.

I wish we could continue to qualify for food stamps. We have debts to pay and bills to pay, so we still need a little help.
- 38 year-old Homeless Parent

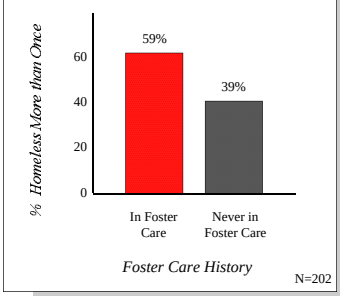
The Cycle of Poverty

In some key ways the families surveyed do not typify the "traditional" homeless family, yet they share many of the same problems. Like many homeless parents nationwide, the parents studied here struggle with the long-standing effects of childhood poverty, substance abuse and domestic violence.

For example, fourteen percent (14%) of parents surveyed were in foster care as children. Research shows that a history of foster care increases a child's likelihood of becoming homeless.[12] In this study, almost three-fifths of those who were in foster care have been homeless more than once—a rate fifty percent higher than those without a foster care history (59% vs. 39% respectively) (see Figure 3).

Additionally, almost ten percent (8%) of the surveyed parents were homeless as children, experiencing extreme poverty at an early age. This population differs from those who did not experience childhood homelessness in two significant ways: they are less likely to have graduated from high school (41% vs. 80%) and more likely to have been

Figure 3: Parents' Foster Care History and Instances of Homelessness



Almost three-fifths of those who were in foster care as children (59%) had been homeless more than once compared to two-fifths of those who were not in foster care (39%).

homeless more than once as adults (75% vs. 39%).

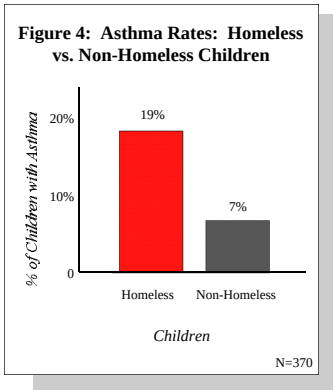
Finally, two-thirds (65%) of the surveyed parents have experienced some form of domestic violence by a spouse or an intimate partner, and almost one-third (29%) report seeking treatment or counseling for substance abuse.[13] These circumstances sometimes trigger or prolong instances of homelessness, and often make employment and housing secondary concerns.

The Cycle Begins Again

An unstable living situation has far reaching consequences on a child's development. Overwhelmingly, children who live in shelters have experienced high rates of sickness, emotional distress and educational delays.[14] Seventeen percent (17%) of parents report that their child has become depressed, sad or anxious and another one-fifth (18%) report that their child has become angry and aggressive since becoming homeless. In terms of health, these children are three times more likely than their non-homeless peers (19% vs.7%) to have asthma (see Figure 4).[15] Also, almost one-fifth of those under the age of five (18%) have been sick more often since becoming homeless.

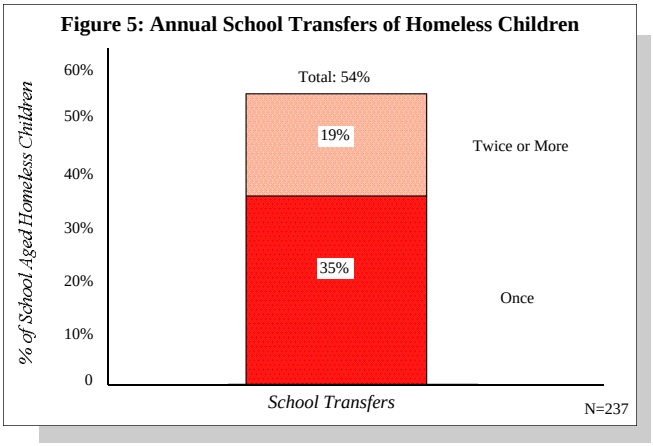
Frequent moves also lead to erratic school experiences that include school transfers and excessive absences. Over half of the homeless children in this region (54%) have changed schools in the last year, and one-fifth (19%) changed schools twice or more (see Figure 5). Furthermore, nearly one in three children (29%) missed more than ten days of school; of those, one-quarter (24%) missed a month or more.

Poor attendance and frequent school changes limit a child's educational performance and long-term success. In fact, each time a child changes schools there is a four to six month period of academic recovery.[16] Children surveyed who had missed ten days of school or more were left back at three times the rate of those who had missed fewer days (31% vs. 9% respectively). Among all surveyed children, fifteen percent (15%) had been left back a grade.



Homeless children in this region are almost three times as likely to have asthma as non-homeless children.

Another critical factor affecting a child's academic success is the education level of their parents. The parents surveyed who did not have a high school diploma were less likely to enroll their children in Head Start or preschool than parents with more education (51% vs. 88%) and their children were more likely to have repeated a grade (29% vs. 13%).



Over one-half of the children (54%) have changed schools in the last year. Nineteen percent (19%) changed schools two or more times and another thirty-five percent (35%) changed schools once .

Where Do We Begin?

The families surveyed in these regions represent a new element of homelessness—the "working homeless." Forty-two percent (42%) are currently working, twenty-eight percent (28%) have never been on public assistance and another forty-three percent (43%) have been dependent on it for less than six months. Nonetheless, the incomes of many working poor families in these regions are not keeping pace with the costs of self-sufficiency. Families once living on the edge now find themselves living in shelters, with a robust economy passing them by. They are not necessarily in need of the more traditional services of job readiness/training, General Equivalency Diploma (GED) and parenting classes, but still find themselves in a fight to remain on their own. Worst of all, their children are at the greatest risk—facing educational barriers, emotional distress and erratic health. Over time, homelessness can leave a permanent scar on a child's future.

In Kentucky, Tennessee, and the Carolinas there is a critical need to re-evaluate current public policies, strengthen the safety net and develop new initiatives to prevent more working poor families from becoming homeless. If left unchecked, family homelessness will not only continue, but it will do so in ways not seen before.

Try to understand that most mothers and parents want the best for our children, as well as the next person. Sometimes we as families slip through the cracks. Thank God my family and I didn't because of this special shelter.
- 43 year-old Homeless Parent

Notes

1. Conference of Mayors, *A Status Report on Hunger and Homelessness in America's Cities* (Washington, DC, 1998), 2.
2. The Institute for Children and Poverty, *Homeless in America: A Children's Story* (New York City: The Institute for Children and Poverty, 1999), 34.;
   National statistics show 57% of homeless families are on public assistance, 59% have at least a high school education and only 26% are employed.
3. Ibid.
4. Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, *Poverty Despite Work Handbook* (Washington, DC: Center on Budget andPolicy Priorities, 1997), 71.
5. Ibid, 78.
6. **Rent**: The fair market rent for a two-bedroom apartment is $445 in Kentucky, $494 in Tennessee, $519 in North Carolina and $491 in South Carolina.;
   National Low Income Housing Coalition, *Out of Reach* (Washington, DC: National Low Income Housing Coalition, 1999) (Available at http://www.nlihc.org/cgi-bin/data).;
   Child Care: The average cost per year for center-based child care for a four year-old child is$3,276 in Kentucky, $3,446 in Tennessee, $3,696 in North Carolina and $3,477 in SouthCarolina.;
   Children's Defense Fund, *Child Care Challenges* (Washington, DC: Children's Defense Fund, 1998) (Available at http://cdfweb.vhw.net/childcare/challenges).;
   Food: USCensus Bureau estimates the cost for a thrifty meal plan for a family of three at $261 a month.;
   USCensus Bureau, *Statistical Abstract of the United States 119th Edition* (Washington DC, 1999), 509.;
   Other: The national average for utilities such as phone and electricity was estimated at $143 a month.;
   USCensus Bureau, 471.;
   Transportation estimates were based on one individual taking forty rides a month. Information came from the Transit Authority in each of the cities where surveys were taken.
7. Anecdotal information based on phone interviews with each state's regional HUD office. Estimates ranged from a one to five year wait for vouchers, October 2000.
8. The Administration for Children and Families, *Access to Child Care for Low Income Working Families* (Washington, DC: The Administration for Children and Families, 1999) (Available at http://www.acf.dhhs.gov/programs/ccb/reports/ccreport.htm).
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Each state's Department of Health and Human Services provided the monthly income cutoffs for a three person family to be eligible for food stamps via telephone—$1,479 in Kentucky, $1,554 in Tennessee, $1,533 in North Carolina and $1,504 in SouthCarolina, October 2000.
12. Mark E. Courtney and Irving Piliavin, *Foster Youth Transitions to Adulthood: Outcomes 12 to 18 Months After Leaving Out-of-Home Care* (Madison: University of Wisconsin at Madison, School of Social Work, 1998) (Available at http://polygot.lss.wisc.edu/socwork.foster.wave-2.pdf), 6.
13. Only those parents who were not currently enrolled in a shelter with domestic violence requirements were included in the domestic violence figure. Similarly, for the substance abuse figure only those in a shelter without substance abuse requirements were included.
14. Institute of Children and Poverty.
15. National Center for Health Statistics, *Number of Selected Reported Chronic Conditions Per 1,000 Persons by Age: United States, 1995* (Washington, DC: Centers for Disease Control, 1999) (Available at http://cdc.gov/nchswww/fastats/asthma.htm).
16. Laurene M. Heyback and Patricia Nix-Hodes, "Reducing Mobility: Good for Kids, Good for Schools," *The Beam: The Newsletter of the National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth* 9, no. 1 (1999): 5.

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Volunteers of America is a national, nonprofit, spiritually based organization providing local human service programs, and opportunities for individual and community involvement. Volunteers of America provides homeless prevention programs, temporary shelter, and other support services to homeless individuals and families across the country and is one of the largest nonprofit providers of affordable housing.

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Since its inception in 1986, HOMES FOR THE HOMELESS (HFH) has functioned on the premise that homelessness is a children's issue, a family issue and an education issue. HFH has worked to combat the intertwined nature of homelessness in two distinctive ways. First, HFH provides residential- and family-based educational programs to 540 families, including over 1,000 children, daily. Our four residential facilities, or American Family Inns, provide the entire family with the educational tools they need to break the cycle of poverty and start children on the road to education as a life-long endeavor. Second, and as an extension of our direct service provision, HFH also works to eradicate homelessness nationwide by documenting our programs' quantitative outcomes and qualitative experiences, as well as research findings from across the country, and disseminating this information. Through its Institute for Children and Poverty, HFH provides program-based curriculum, training and technical assistance in dozens of urban, suburban and rural communities across the country.

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